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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that investigated the managerial behavior of a principal for 16 consecutive days in a rural elementary school setting in Northeastern Mississippi. According to available literature, no previously reported study has used direct observation to study an elementary school principal at work for longer than a week. Four particular areas were investigated: (1) amount of time spent on 10 administrative activities; (2) amount of time the principal spent participating in scheduled and unscheduled meetings and conferences; (3) the number of personal interactions on a daily basis; and (4) the number of times that the principal was interrupted while involved in office-related tasks or activities. Findings indicated that the principal spent the majority of her time managing by walking about the buildings and grounds, handling personnel matters, performing office-related tasks, disciplining students, and working with parents. The findings also revealed that the principal spent nearly 25 percent of her time on the job participating in scheduled and unscheduled meetings, and conferences. These findings indicate that preparation programs need to train elementary school principals to cope successfully with a role characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation. Principals need also to be taught how to manage by walking about, supervise human resources, perform office-related tasks efficiently, involve parents in their children's education, and improve education. (Contains 16 references.) (DFR)

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ED 452 604

FIELD INVESTIGATION OF ON-THE-JOB BEHAVIOR OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

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Abstract: This paper is based on a study investigating the managerial behavior of a principal for 16 consecutive days in a rural elementary school setting in Northeastern Mississippi. According to available literature, no previously reported study has used direct observation to study an elementary school principal at work for longer than a week. The study's findings revealed that the principal observed spent the majority of her time managing by walking about the buildings and grounds, handling personnel matters, performing office-related tasks, disciplining students, and working with parents. The findings also revealed that the principal spent nearly 25% of her time on the job participating in scheduled and unscheduled meetings and conferences.

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Educational reformers and policy makers have long contended that quality schools are led by strong, professionally focused leaders who pursue a vision of what can be, make sound decisions, establish communication patterns, set organizational culture, introduce innovations, monitor curriculum, supervise instruction, maintain physical facilities, and develop positive school-home partnerships. To actualize such contentions, increased attention has been focused on the principal's role as leader and manager. As a leader, which may be the most important facet of the two-fold role, educational reformers contend that the principal's focus should be on planning, developing curriculum, improving instruction, and shaping culture. As a manager, the principal's focus should be on working with or through others to accomplish administrative tasks that impact daily functions (Greenfield, 1995; Hill, 1990; Sergiovani, 1987, 1990).

This paper is based on research completed for a dissertation study on the managerial behavior of a principal in a rural elementary school setting in Northeastern Mississippi (Ariratana, 2000). Four particular areas investigated were:

1. Amount of time the principal spent on 10 administrative activities: (a) office-related tasks, (b) business management, (c) staff development, (d) curriculum and instruction, (e) managing by walking about (MBWA), (f) student discipline, (g) parent involvement, (h) personnel matters, (i) shaping school culture, and (j) other.

2. Amount of time the principal spent participating in scheduled and unscheduled meetings and conferences.

3. The number of personal interactions (face-to-face encounters) which the principal experienced on a daily basis.

4. The number of times that the principal was interrupted while involved in office-related tasks or activities such as conferences.

How the elementary school principal in this study spent her time on the job was also compared to how principals in similar studies spent their time.

Ariratana's study is important because relatively few investigations have been done using direct observation to study principals in their work environments. Much of what we have learned about the work of principals has been collected through the use of questionnaires. The shortcoming of the questionnaire approach, however, is that it relies on the respondent's self-reporting of events and may not accurately reflect actual practice. Also, none of the reported studies that used direct observation investigated an individual principal's behavior for longer than a week (Ariratana, Zhang, & Blendinger, 1997; Blendinger & Snipes, 1996, 1997; Rosenblatt & Somech, 1998).

Research Design

To guide her observations, Ariratana (2000) used an observational framework developed by Blendinger and Snipes (1997) specifically for shadowing school administrators. The framework helped her to avoid much of the tedious repetition often encountered by observers using the earlier and more cumbersome methods (Mintzberg, 1973; Kmetz; 1982; Wethayanugoon, 1995).

The subject observed was a 35 year-old female elementary school principal. Before becoming the school's principal, the subject taught and served as an assistant principal for approximately 10 years.

The school where the subject worked was originally built in 1924 as a high school and was reorganized into an elementary school in 1970. Student enrollment at the school was approximately 600. Eighty-six percent of the students were African American and 14 percent were White. The school's staff was comprised of 25 classroom teachers, one reading facilitator, who also served as an assistant principal, four special education teachers, and 20 support staff members.

Facilities consisted of four buildings. The main building was a three story-building which housed the principal's office, school office, auditorium, and classrooms.

A second building housed classrooms and a gymnasium, while the third building, a two-story structure, accommodated classrooms and a computer center. A library and music room was housed in a fourth building. The principal's office was next to the school office. A door connected the two offices. The school office was a busy place. Teachers, parents, students, and visitors constantly walked into the office to ask questions and conduct business.

Field observations were conducted from November 18, 1998 through December 17, 1998. Observation periods lasted for the entire school day, starting with the subject arrived in the morning at 7:00 a.m. and ending when the subject departed in the evening at 5:00 p.m. During the 16 days that she was observed, the principal spent 155 hours working on the job. Her average workday was 9.6 hours.

Findings From Ariranta's Study

During her observations, Ariranta (2000) found that the principal generally started work at approximately 7:00 a.m. After arriving at school and checking her calendar, she first welcomed students whose parents drove them to school and then went to the school bus area in front of the school entrance to welcome students who walked or took the bus to school. After that, she monitored the breakfast program in the school cafeteria.

The principal's early morning activities were usually finished before 8:00 a.m. She then made morning announcements over the intercom from the school office. After making announcements, she monitored halls. As the principal walked the school's hallways, she raised her hand to convey that students should be silent. While walking the hallways, she greeted and talked to teachers and parents, and often paused to observe students climbing the stairs.

The principal spent the remainder of the morning working at her desk, touring the buildings and grounds, observing classrooms and talking with parents. She ended the morning by monitoring the school's cafeteria.

The principal's afternoon was spent doing a second tour of the building and grounds; performing office-related work; observing teachers in their classrooms; evaluating teaching performances; meeting with teachers, students and parents; and reading teachers' lesson plans. Lesson plans were one of her major concerns and teachers turned them into her twice a week. She diligently checked the plans and provided written feedback.

At dismissal time, the principal made final announcements and then stood in a highly visible location on the school grounds to monitor student departures. She and the duty teachers always walked the students across the street and checked with school bus drivers for any problems. Before leaving school, if time permitted, she worked at her desk reviewing teachers' lesson plans and other documents.

The principal was a visible presence throughout the day. Her work was varied and hurried: she did a lot of brief, fragmented tasks, quickly moving from one to the next.

Of the total 155 hours on the job, the principal spent the majority of her time "managing by walking about" the buildings and grounds (26.9 hours), handling personnel matters (21.3 hours), performing office-related tasks (20.7 hours), disciplining students (20.7 hours), doing "other" activities (16.6 hours), working with parents (15.0 hours), and addressing curriculum and instruction (13.5 hours). She spent less time involved in staff development (9.4 hours), handling business matters (7.2 hours), and shaping school culture (3.5 hours).

Time recorded for scheduled and unscheduled meetings and conferences (16.7 and 18.4 hours respectively) indicated that the principal spent nearly 25% of her time involved in these activities. Because she maintained an open-door policy, the

principal had many face-to-face encounters and was often interrupted by teachers, school staff members, and parents while doing office-related tasks.

Compared to other elementary school principals who were studied using direct observation, the principal in Ariratana's study spent more of her time managing by walking about, addressing personnel issues, handling business matters, handling student discipline, involving parents in their children's education, participating in staff development, shaping school culture, and in other activities such as attending meetings in the district office. She spent less time than the other principals engaging in office-related tasks and instructional activities. The principal in this study also spent over 25% of her time participating in meetings and conferences, slightly more than the other principals. The number of interactions and interruptions she experienced compared favorably to the principals in the other studies (Blendinger & Snipes, 1996; Kmetz, 1982; Rosenblatt & Somech, 1998).

Implications Based on the Findings

As the findings revealed, the principal that Arirantana (2000) observed can be generally described as a very visible administrator almost always on the go. Seven implications suggested by the findings follow:

1. The fact that the principal spent 17.3% of her time managing by walking about suggests that being a visible presence was very important to her. While walking hallways, welcoming students at a school loading area, or visiting classrooms, she encountered many persons and spent considerable time talking with teachers, staff members, parents, and students. She also constantly monitored the safety of the school's environment. The principal often consulted with teachers; acted as overseer of the school curriculum, monitoring the reading program cooperatively with the reading facilitator; approved lesson plans; and recommended teaching techniques to her teachers. According to Smith and Andrews (1989), strong instructional leaders are

constantly seen in the building by both staff and students, make themselves accessible, and frequently observe classrooms. This principal appeared to fit such a profile.

2. Managing human resources was also given importance. The principal spent 13.8% of her time recruiting, screening, and interviewing applicants for jobs; hiring employees; and evaluating teachers. Most of this time was spent evaluating teachers and interviewing applicants.

3. Maintaining student discipline was another priority. The principal spent 13.4% of her time talking with students who misbehaved, calling parents, and maintaining discipline records.

4. Shaping school culture was another priority. The principal invested considerable effort in shaping the school's culture as evidenced by her interest in helping to decorate the school for the Christmas holidays and participating in a party intended to promote employee morale. Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) contend that transformational leadership requires shaping a positive school culture which celebrates being a member of a teaching and learning community. The principal observed in Ariranta's study modeled such leadership.

5. The principal also demonstrated that she was into "nuts and bolts" management because she spent nearly 20% of her time doing office-related tasks and handling business matters. According to Burns (1978), transactional leaders (managers) take charge and get the job done: that is, they are task-oriented.

6. Participation in meetings and conferences appears to consume much of an elementary school principal's effort. The principal observed spent one-quarter of her time participating in meetings and conferences, many of which were not scheduled prior to the start of the workday.

7. The principal frequently interacted with other adults and was often interrupted while working at her desk. The interruptions were partly due to the fact that she practiced an "open door" policy and her office was next to the school office.

If the findings in the Arirtana (2000) study are a valid indication of what happens on the job, preparation programs need to train elementary school principals to successfully cope with a role characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation. They also need to be taught how to manage by walking about, supervise human resources, efficiently perform office-related tasks, involve parents in their children's education, and improve instruction. In addition, they need to be taught how to take a leadership role in staff development, conduct business matters, and shape school culture. Because elementary school principals spend a large amount of time involved in meetings and conferences, preparation programs should devote particular effort to techniques necessary for effectively conducting these activities. Since frequent encounters and interruptions are an integral part of the job, they need to learn strategies which minimize or control such occurrences (e.g., closing the door of the principal's office when such action is appropriate or asking the secretary to hold telephone calls).

Interested readers of this paper wanting more information about the study on which it is based can obtained such by writing Dr. Wallapha Ariratana, Faculty of Education, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand 40002 or Dr. Jack Blendinger, Department of Educational Leadership, P.O. Box LH, Mississippi State University, MS 39762.

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